

How to Be More Productive

Evidence-based strategies to bring out your best working self.

Photo Credit: Will Anderson for *The New York Times*

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Hello, Workers!

What happens to make your work day go astray? It's most likely a combination of modern technology and age-old human foibles. Distractions — the enemy of focused work — are commonplace thanks to email and the internet. And our fear-based tendency to procrastinate is as strong as it ever was.

So, here are seven simple steps aimed at reducing the obstacles — both internal and external — that hinder productivity. I'll make evidence-based suggestions to help you bring out your best working self. The challenge is geared toward office work, but you can apply these techniques to any job, and to the things you need to get done at home.

Each task takes only a few moments of commitment. Think you can handle it? Let's get to work!

1. Commit to 10 Minutes
2. Make a Realistic To-Do List
3. Connect Your Body and Mind
4. Rise Above the Noise
5. Find a Partner
6. Extend Your Focus
7. Look to the Future

Commit to 10 Minutes

For today's challenge, pick one item on your to-do list that needs to be completed fairly soon. Then, commit to working on it for a total of 10 minutes. That's it, just 10 minutes. The catch? Do it with uninterrupted concentration. That means that this one task should be performed on one screen, or even on paper. The task you choose to do today can be one portion of a larger task, and you certainly don't need to finish it for this exercise. If you're at home today, consider doing 10 minutes of personal work, such as paying bills or filing away old paperwork.



To help, we will break your 10-minute working session into two five-minute intervals. First, set a timer on your phone for five minutes and work solely on this project and nothing else. Do not stop to check your email, other work communications, phone or the internet. If you think it will help, inform your coworkers or family that you do not want to be interrupted. If you need to research something or refer to a different file, make a note of it but do that work later.

After the first five minutes are up, look away from your screen or paper, change your physical position and stretch. After a one-minute break, return to your working position, and set the timer for another five minutes of uninterrupted work.

Why Am I Doing This?

One of the great myths of modern life is that multitasking improves productivity. In fact, [research shows](#) that the brain can really only concentrate on one activity at a time. Whenever we toggle back and forth between tasks, [we dilute our ability to complete any of them well](#), and mistakes become more likely. Creativity suffers too, as distractions block new pathways toward complex and related thoughts.

You may be surprised at how often you want to check your email or phone while performing this challenge. You may even convince yourself that you simply *have* to look at a different screen.

Unfortunately, the brain has a primal attraction to shiny new stimuli. That's why it is so tempting to check our emails, text messages and Twitter while we are at work. The purpose of this exercise is to purposefully keep our attention on our chosen task.

The break between the two portions of the challenge is important too. When we focus with great effort on a single activity our brain periodically needs to reset and refresh before it can return to full strength. Moving to a different position sends a burst of blood to the brain [and enhances cognition](#).

Make a Realistic To-Do List

Today, think about how you handle your to-do lists. Do you write them down? Commit them to memory? Avoid them and hope you'll simply remember all you have to do? Take a few minutes today to create the ideal to-do list for one day of work. That means a list that is specific, realistic and contains only items you should get done today or tomorrow.



Your to-do list can be on paper, or you can use an app like [Todoist](#) – but use one or the other, not both. Put careful thought into the list so that it reflects your biggest priorities for the day.

Here are some tips to help:

Keep the to-dos small enough to accomplish in one day: The more specific the tasks on your list, the better. A goal like “work on report” could represent at least several days’ worth of work. Instead, write down something like “research the second section of the report and write five paragraphs based on that research.”

Keep the to-do items clear: A list that’s too vague can leave you confused over which next step to take.

Limit your list to fewer than a dozen tasks: An overly ambitious list with too many items leads to multitasking attempts, which are almost always counterproductive.

Here’s an example of a clear to-do list:

- Send out three emails to potential clients
- Update “about” section of website
- Proofread sales report
- Update boss on new project
- *Personal* - Make eye exam appointment.

Keep your list nearby. Midway into your day, check to see if certain tasks need to be added or postponed, and redo your list if necessary. If you don’t complete all your tasks, that’s OK! Life is messy and ever-changing. But check off each task that you do finish, and take a few moments to fully revel in the experience of completion.

Why Am I Doing This?

As we plunge into each day, it is easy to become derailed by trivial and nonessential tasks. In fact, we often actively *avoid* the essential tasks out of fear and uncertainty, even though this makes us anxious. Research by [E. J. Masicampo and Roy F. Baumeister](#) has

found that brooding about unfulfilled tasks can lead to intrusive thoughts, while making a plan to complete them helps relieve those thoughts.

A physical to-do list – whether it is tangible or digital – [provides structure](#) and magnetizes us to return to what matters most. But it needs to be carefully curated to prevent frustration and avoidance.

Connect Your Body and Mind

Choose an item on your to-do list (go back to yesterday's challenge if you skipped it) that requires you to work at a desk. Now, take a moment to think about what's going on with your body before you start to work:

Posture. Make sure your back is squarely against your chair, so that your bottom is solidly on your seat, and that your feet are planted firmly on the floor or on a footrest. Before you start to work, touch the very top of your head with your fingers and gently lift your head and shoulders to follow. Picture arrows coming out of the sides of your shoulders and adjust them wider. Stay straight rather than leaning forward as you look at your screen (and move your screen closer if need be).



Breathing. As you breathe, keep your shoulders low and relaxed. Push your belly outward as you inhale. Pull your belly inward as you exhale, fully releasing the air you have inhaled.

Movement. Now start your sustained 10 minutes of focusing on your task. Throughout the day, if you can, alternate between sitting and standing every 15 or 20 minutes, taking a break of a few minutes between each interval. If you don't have a standing desk, you should still take a break. During your first break, simply stand up at your desk. During your second break, take a short walk. Use a timer so you stay on track.

Why Am I Doing This?

Through simple posture adjustments, using methods like the Alexander Technique, you can prevent the unconscious tensing, scrunching and slouching that leads to physical discomfort. Posture awareness keeps you relaxed in the present moment, rather than straining toward the future. It helps free your mind to release its best thoughts.

Additionally, breathing better can help you think more clearly. Many people breathe vertically from the chest, with their shoulders moving up and down. Under stress, this tendency often worsens, leading to a series of shallow, nervous breaths. If you do this, you aren't using your lungs to full advantage. [Breathing from the diaphragm](#) brings more oxygen to the brain so you can think more clearly and calmly.

Another way to improve your cognition is to move. Research has shown that cycling through different physical positions brings [more blood to the brain](#). Research also tells us that the upper limit of your ability to focus on one thing is probably about 20 minutes. So, rather than fight that reality, it's best to take regular breaks.

Rise Above the Noise

The next time you sit down to work, sign out of all email and social media accounts and check them only once every hour. For extra credit, make that every two hours. If you're afraid you'll miss something really urgent, dial that down to 30 minutes, but 60 minutes is preferable. If you can, turn off inter-office communications like Slack, too, but check with a manager first. Don't forget about your phone. Turn it off, or stash it in a desk drawer.



Every hour, as part of your work breaks, take 10 minutes to sign back in and see if any communications must be answered immediately, and answer only those. Then switch everything off again and get back to work. Leave 20 minutes at the end of your day, or at the beginning of the next day, to respond to your remaining messages.

(This is an excellent challenge to try on a weekend or when you need to accomplish some personal tasks.)

Why Am I Doing This?

If you spend a big part of your day checking and refreshing your email and the internet, you are *reacting* rather than acting. To be truly productive, you need to take control of the work that *you* – and not some random email sender – have decided is important. Minimizing interruptions is the best way to do this.

You may feel like you're getting a lot done by switching between emails and the internet and other projects. But research has shown that toggling between tasks [takes a cognitive toll](#), and your work suffers because of it. Frequently you give [partial attention](#) to several tasks rather than your full attention to just one.

Not only that, but we are actually attracted to email and the internet as a way to procrastinate. It's much easier to read an email than start on a project or revise a presentation. Checking Twitter or Facebook is a cheap thrill: Our brain gets a [brief rush of pleasure](#) from the shiny new distraction. But when the thrill wears off and we return to a workaday task, our connection to it has frayed.

You may be surprised at how tempting it is to stray from your task by switching to other technology. That's because the primitive part of our brain is wired to crave new stimuli. If you find yourself slipping, that's OK. Just making the effort to stay focused will ensure that your day has fewer interruptions.

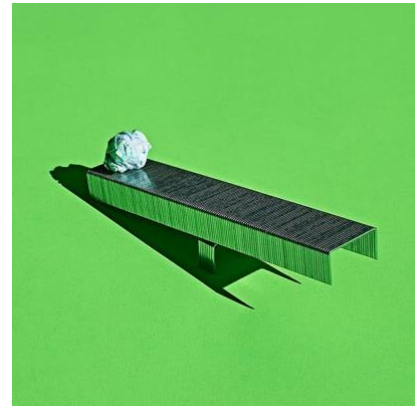
Are You Staying on Track?

To help you meet your self-imposed deadlines, don't forget to employ the other strategies you've learned so far this week:

- Periodically turn off email notifications and social media so your attention is more focused.
- Take time to monitor your breathing and your posture, and make sure to take regular breaks.
- Be sure to keep up with your daily to-do list.

Find a Partner

For your challenge today, pick a fairly difficult task from your to-do list that doesn't have a clear deadline but is nevertheless important to you or your organization. It should be something that would most likely cause you to procrastinate on a normal day. Set a clear goal on what you want to achieve today — remember, it doesn't have to be an entire project: You're better off defining a significant piece of it that you want to get done. For example, you can set up a brand new Excel chart; update three sections of your company's website; write 1,000 words of a report; etc. Set an exact time, today or tomorrow, as a deadline for this goal.



Now, here comes the fun part. Find an accountability partner: It can be a friend, family member or a co-worker. Perhaps the arrangement can work both ways. This person should be willing to serve as a combination enforcer/cheerleader, checking in to make sure you meet your self-imposed deadline. (Whether you actually show them your finished work is up to you, but please don't lie.)

As an alternative, or in addition to this, announce on social media that you will be completing a task, and then confirm later in the same format that you have followed through on it.

Why Am I Doing This?

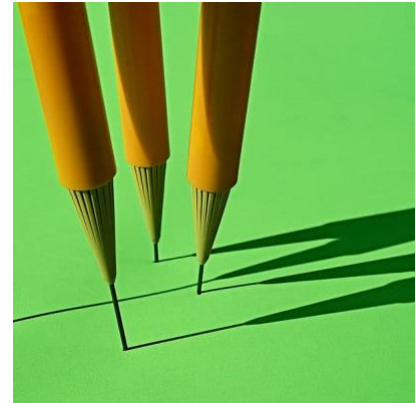
If you give yourself a deadline, and no one else knows about it, there will be no one else to know or care if you fail to meet it. In fact, research shows that [self-imposed deadlines](#) are often ineffective, especially among chronic procrastinators.

But *announcing* your deadline to someone else — even to someone without a stake in the outcome — brings [a level of accountability](#) to your task that didn't exist before. If you don't complete the task and have to confess that to your accountability partner, then you lose face — and that can be a powerful incentive to keep working.

By making an announcement about your goal, you are putting your reputation on the line, as the behavioral economist [Dan Ariely](#) has noted. The deadline may be self-imposed, but whether or not you meet it becomes a reflection of your character.

Extend Your Focus

Today I want you to spend two full hours of time on a single work-related task. (Yes, two full hours.) If you don't have a task to do that will take two hours, find two or three smaller tasks that need a stretch of concentration to complete. The goal is to devote around two hours of complete focus on real work today. If today is not a workday for you, make a note to try this the next time you are working.



To accomplish this, lean on the lessons you've learned from earlier in the week: First, set aside a block of time to work only on this task (*monotasking*). Then divide the larger task into three or more separate increments and write them down (*a mini to-do list*). Tell your manager, co-workers and family members that you don't want to be interrupted during this time. Ask someone to contact you when the time is up, and to make sure that you have actually done what you set out to do (*our previously discussed accountability partner*).

Turn off email, social media and your phone for at least 20 minutes at a time, but preferably for the *whole* stretch of time (*get rid of distractions*). Don't set a timer this time around, but do try to take a break and move around every 15 or 20 minutes or so (*connect your mind and body*). Use your breaks to look away from your work and get refocused on the task at hand. As you work, don't focus on quality. Just live in the moment and *work*.

Why Am I Doing This?

The purpose of this exercise is to avoid procrastination and achieve what the computer science professor [Cal Newport](#) calls deep work – “the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task.” As we have seen on previous days, minimizing interruptions is a key part of this process.

But there's more to it than that. So often, procrastination is really about fear of imperfection or outright failure. That's why we tend to offload a demanding task to our future self – a self that will magically be more well-equipped than our present self to get something done. Working hard in the present means shedding an idealized image of your final product. You'll have time later to shine and buff your work. For now, just get going.

It's easy to avoid a project because you simply don't know how to start. To ward off this kind of paralysis, divide your task into increments that are as specific as possible. In

doing so, you may find that you need to ask for help or information before you start. Get that help – and then get started.

Take breaks when you feel your attention beginning to falter. I didn't want you to set a timer this time around, because I'm hoping that at some point you'll reach that [special state of consciousness known as flow](#), where you are so engrossed in your work that you lose track of time. That's when the really great work gets done.

Look to the Future

Take a moment to pause and think back on the changes you made this week. What worked? What didn't? Did you accomplish something that you didn't think you would? Congratulate yourself for taking concrete steps to improve your productivity. Then, forgive yourself for not always reaching your goals. We are all human, after all, and fallible. As a bonus, take an extra moment to express gratitude to the people who helped you along the way this week.



After your moment of reflection, write down three new things you did this week that could potentially be carried over into new and permanent habits over time. Place the list on your desk in view, so that it could help you get you back on track next time your mind starts to stray from your work.

Why Am I Doing This?

A normal workday will always upend your best-laid plans to be perfectly productive. This challenge is about being realistic as you seek to make lasting changes in the way you work.

It's common for people to berate themselves for failing to work in an optimal way. But in fact, [new habits are extremely hard to form](#). By [starting small](#) and trying to adopt new habits gradually, we have a better chance of making them stick. The goal is for our most desirable behavior [to become automatic](#).

Any kind of progress is incremental. Imperfections and backsliding are inevitable. Be kind to yourself as you embark on the process of becoming more productive. And acknowledge that you can't always do it alone.